

Sermon September 16, 2018

Over the summer I did something for my spiritual life that attracted quite a bit of your attention: I spent 8 days in silence at Ignatius Jesuit Centre in Guelph, Ontario. A lot of you asked me about it I noticed, both before and after I went. That was quite striking to me. I go on retreats every year and that seldom attracts attention - maybe in a bit of polite interest afterwards. A few might say when I get back that they hoped I had a nice holiday, which makes me smile a bit because if you've ever been on a retreat you know it's not a holiday.

But *this* time a number of you asked and it lead to some fairly lengthy conversations, which I thought was just great. I wanted to talk more about it here because your interest made me think it could be helpful to a number of us to hear about it. I wanted to get past all the clergy/priestly stuff like robes and pulpits and stuff because I don't want anyone to think that a retreat like that is something that only priests can do. Or that I only did it because it's my job or something.

In fact, of the 40 or so people in my group, almost all of them were lay people. I was the only priest, and there were maybe 4 or 5 women from religious communities, but say 80% were lay people. So it's something that anyone can do and judging from

the fact that they offer these retreats all year round in lots of different places worldwide a lot of people *must be* doing them.

So I wasn't alone on the retreat even though it was silent. That's a key piece. Being in silent retreat is a great experience. Being silent with a group made it even more mindful and intentional in many ways.

The schedule was kept very simple and was the same every day so, after a brief meeting at the very start of the week, there were no announcements or instructions given. No one addressed anyone else in any way. Worship was at 11:30am daily. We spoke during the service but not to each other, obviously. Meals were delicious and were at 8, 12:30, and 6. All the cooking, serving, and cleanup was provided by the retreat house. With one exception, there were no other events or activities. So it was a complete 'retreat' from daily activities. No chores. No deadlines.

It's kind of funny that everyone at St. Helen's asked me the same question: 'what did you do about needing some to pass the salt at dinner?' I do think it was every one of you spoke to me about it. The simple answer is that everything was organized so that would not be needed.

There was no one to look after except myself. That became hugely restful as the days passed. If you pause for a moment and think about the load we all carry in terms of caring for others, you might begin to see what I mean. I love the people I care for greatly, every single one of them - as I'm sure you all do - and I feel so privileged and blessed to be able to care for people in most of the ways I do it. It was also very healing and restoring to let go of that for a week, an important thing for caregivers to do once in a while.

As the retreat began, at 8 o'clock on a Saturday night, the leaders asked us to 'give each other the gift of silence' which we very much did, by not ever speaking to one another, by keeping very quiet as we moved around the large retreat house, and by not even making eye contact as we we passed in the hallways, in the dining room, or elsewhere. Even when I'd be out walking around the 600 acres of beautiful farmland they had there, I'd be way out in the back forty, miles from nowhere, and my fellow retreatants and I would pass on the trail without speaking or making eye contact.

So. It was very very quiet. And it *became* quieter. And more quiet still. By Tuesday evening the silence had become thick and palpable – a sort of presence that moved with me wherever I

went. It seems most descriptive to say that the silence became a *companion*. The silence was *with* me. It *supported* me. And that's where the *purpose* of the retreat began to be apparent, the *benefit* of it.

To get at that, I need to talk about the *spiritual direction* that was provided. That was the one time each day that we could talk, to our spiritual director. The same person each day. But we didn't just shoot the breeze. We had 45 minutes a day to figure out together what my focus would be for the next 24 silent hours. My director, Bernie Carroll, like all the directors at the centre, was deeply practiced in this. His role was to help me get to places spiritually that I would not have got to on my own. And it was wonderful! But *not* easy. Quite difficult some of the time and even painful. I'm quite an eager student of spiritual things I think. But, like all of us, there are some ways that I don't *want* to grow, things I don't *want* to look at, blind spots where I *can't* see without help, places in my spirit I'm *afraid* to explore. When those things came up in the silence, I would want to *distract* myself. I'd find myself wanting to walk down the highway to the Walmart to buy some soap or something, even though I had all the soap I needed and more. Or a thousand other possible distractions. It was Bernie's role in our daily meeting to *call* me on that and he did it admirably. By doing that He helped me get to some of

those difficult places - and when necessary to stay there long enough to get the benefit.

On my own I would not have gone there, stayed there, or even *known* that there could be a spiritual benefit to any of it. On my own, I would have *distracted* myself away from all that, *entertained* myself away from it, *worked* myself away from it, or whatever. We *all* do that I think. Bernie helped me see how I was distracting myself from the real spiritual work and to remove those distractions. When he found out on the first day that I was eagerly reading the autobiography of the founder of the order, he told me no more reading. Period. That was really hard! But it was also just the best! It took away a chief distraction and opened the door to something really good that, again, I would not have got to on my own. *I* would have thought reading spiritual books was good.

What helped all this even more was that Bernie didn't have to think all this up on his own. He had major resources to drawn upon. He lives and works in a community, the Society of Jesus, who have steeped themselves in the practice of spiritual direction for almost 500 years. 'The Spiritual Exercises' upon which my retreat were written by Ignatius of Loyola over a 20 year period in the early 1500's. His life and the exercises he wrote are a whole

topic on their own that we don't really have time for today, unfortunately. But they are to me an ancient resource of proven benefit for the spiritual life of Christians, built carefully, over a long period, on the best of foundations. They're quite unlike other, 'newer' approaches, which I've sometimes found to be without foundations at all. They've been published in over 4500 different editions. Millions of people have followed the exercises over the centuries. I half expected the exercises, the style of direction, and the Jesuit community itself to be rigid and prescriptive. They were anything but. I found them rigorous, courageously progressive, self reflecting and self critical, humble, full of humour, and so very helpful to me in finding what I was seeking. The exercises and the spiritual director provide direction, but they do not do the spiritual work itself. That is *always* up to us and God.

*This* is where we get to the heart of the matter and where it gets a bit difficult to speak about what *happens* in this kind of spiritual work. After days in silence, with few distractions, the spirit *moves*. Areas of insight open up. There is no one else to talk to so we talk to God. And that is just the best. God is alive and well. Let me tell you. There is mass confusion about that these days. Lots of people have trouble experiencing God and I do understand why that is. But hear me on this, please. If you want

to talk to God, God *wants* to listen. That is true absolutely anywhere and everywhere you might be but it is especially possible when you have 'retreated from' all the millions of distractions that daily living creates. Our busy lives are *full* of noise that makes it difficult to hear what God is saying. So much so that over time we could *come* to think that God isn't there. But over a period of days you can journey deeper and deeper into silence. You begin to hear a voice, a knowing, that eventually you realize is God speaking to you. It may be something entirely new, that you've never heard before, or it may come in a *way* that you weren't expecting, or you may realize when you finally *do* hear that He has been saying it to you for a very long time but you could not hear it until you found a way to be quiet enough, for long enough that you *could* hear.